

Marina Mahathir in her own write

Malaysiakini

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Malaysiakini talks to Marina Mahathir about her book, 'The Apple and the Tree', published by Penguin Random House SEA, scheduled for release on Nov 23.

Malaysiakini: I had expected when you told me you had this manuscript, oh, she probably submitted a few chapters for her Masters dissertation, but you actually wrote something else for submission.

Marina: Yes, I did.

So when was this book conceived?

I did write parts of it during the course, because every couple of weeks we had to write something and it is work-shopped. The early chapter about my childhood house in Kedah was an essay I submitted with my application for the course.

For my dissertation, I had wanted to expand on a piece I had written about a time when I was in the AIDS Council, and we hosted a controversial international conference. In it there was a bit about a transgender speaker.

My supervisor said that was interesting, I should write about that. It was an “Aha” moment, “Yaa!” So my dissertation was a lot of interviews with trans people, a portrait of six or seven.

I hope to turn that into a book sometime because their stories are fascinating. I wanted to show that they are human and cannot be defined just by their gender.

I talked to one of them in Negri, the one who was in a constitutional case. She’s a sex worker. She’s also a prize-winning cat-breeder and cavy-breeder (N.B: Cavy – a South American rodent kin to the guinea pig.). She had all these trophies. She read books on how to breed cats and cavies, how to prepare them for shows. I mean, who would think?

Another amazing interview was when I was in England, June, 2019. My parents came because dad was speaking at Cambridge or Oxford. Because it was Raya time, the High Commission had an open house – in the garden, tons of people, stalls. I was hanging out with my friends when this tall woman in red came up to me.

“Hi, I am M....”

“Hello.”

“I’m the first transgender Crown Prosecutor in the UK.”

“Are you Malaysian?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got to interview you.”

I went to see her in court in north London. Imagine, someone from a conservative family in KL, non-Muslim, who left, studied law, rose to become a Crown Prosecutor.

I gave the manuscript to an agent in England, but she wanted to give it to an academic publisher. I said no, it’s not an academic book.

So when and how did ‘The Apple and the Tree’ come to being?

In September last year, a friend in Singapore, June, e-mailed me, said Penguin

would like to get in touch with me. Nora, my publisher, got in touch and said they would like me to write about being my dad's daughter. My deadline was April this year. Okay, I already had bits and pieces.

It also helped that I had taken an online memoir writing course. One of the recommendations was "morning pages" - as soon as you get up in the morning, before doing anything else, you start writing, whatever comes into your head, about 500 words.

It was good practice. I did about 40-some pieces about the family, particular incidents, which I then expanded. Then I had to arrange, put them in chronological order. I had to ask for a week's extension of my deadline when I found two gaps in the memoir, one about 15 years.

Was there any hesitation, reluctance in exposing family matters?

There's a lot that's there. There's also a lot that isn't. You have to make choices. I wrote what would move the story forward.

I didn't tell anyone, not even my family. I told them only way after I had submitted the manuscript. "Hey, by the way, I have this book coming out. It's really about me, and you all are bit players, so don't worry about it." (Laughs.

Makes a solemn face.) My brothers were silent. They were worried.

Surely, you didn't use the same line to your dad? Dad, don't worry, you are only a bit player in the book.

Oh no, no, of course not. (Laughs) In one of my early discussions about the book with Nora, I asked her, "Who is the main character in this book?" She said, "You." That helped. I didn't want to write a biography of my dad.

But a lot of people are probably going to buy the book because your dad is in it, and he's not a bit player in it.

(Mock resignation) Yeah, I know.

The first excerpt from the book Malaysiakini is publishing will be your account of your dad's first heart attack. I want to ask you about ... THE LETTER. (N.B: The reference is to a letter, in a sealed envelope addressed to Anwar Ibrahim, which Mahathir handed to Marina before he went in for his surgery in 1989. Malaysiakini will be publishing the excerpt tomorrow.)

I knew you were going to pick up on that.

Not see that elephant in the middle of the room? Please! You are probably going to give an evasive answer, but the question must be asked: will the letter and its contents, still in your possession, see the light of day?

(Marina shrugs and laughs.)

Have you ever been tempted to hark back to your Secret Seven/Famous Five days - steam open the envelope to see what's inside?

No. I'm big on delayed gratification, so I can wait. (Grins)

Hmmm, sealed lips and envelope. Let's talk about you then, because it is your memoir. You worked in the monthly Her World for a few years, years of models and catwalks and fashion shoots, fulfilling a childhood fantasy. It's quite an about-turn from being immersed in glamorous couture to heading the AIDS Council, championing the disadvantaged victims of that debilitating disease.

I was ambushed when I went for the meeting of the AIDS Council. My appointment as chairman had been planned. Before that I had never joined any organisation, chaired anything.

What did you think you were walking into?

They called, said they didn't have enough women on the board. Okay lah, support, listen, say a few words. I wasn't expecting, "Okay, you chair." Okay. Next thing I knew, it was 12 years and it took me everywhere, and I met all kinds of amazing people.

Was that when the apple fell from the tree? Because your dad is not exactly enamoured with the lifestyles of the usual victims of AIDS.

(Laughs) I don't know, I guess.

Are you the apple of your dad's eye?

Don't know, you'd have to ask him. Given that I've given him quite a bit of grief, probably not.

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